

NEW RELEASE  
6 April 1987

Contras, I.

## INTO THE JUNGLE

**D**ESPITE MORE bad news—the resignation of Arturo Cruz from the *contra* leadership, the Tower Commission's documentation of White House disarray, and a negative vote in the House on continued military aid—the *contra* cause isn't dead yet. The Reagan administration and the Nicaraguan resistance have six months in which to show enough military and political progress to pick up 17 votes in the House and win the \$105 million the administration is requesting to keep the *contras* fighting through next year. There is not much prospect for famous victories in the struggle for Nicaraguan democracy. If that country ever gains its freedom, it ~~will~~ likely be through a long process of survival acts.

There are signs of progress on the military front. According to *contra* military commander Enrique Bermudez, 11,000 fighters have made their way into Nicaragua since early January despite Sandinista efforts to block them, and the total force of 15,000 will be inside in another month. Bermudez, who was in Miami over the weekend of March 14-16 for talks designed to settle the *contras'* uproarious political affairs, claimed that his forces are engaged in 60 combat actions per week with the Sandinistas. The administration, on the basis of what it says is independent intelligence, confirms the numbers, and the Nicaraguan government has issued even higher figures—350 clashes during the period from January 1 to February 5, and 330 from February 5 to March 5. To the charge that the *contras* can't or won't fight, the answer seems to be: they are fighting.

**B**ERMUDEZ SAID his Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) is fighting now to retake territory lost during the official cutoff of U.S. funds in 1986. "The Sandinistas want to keep contact with us, make us fight, waste our resources, and get exhausted. When we regain the initiative, we will start fighting where we want. That will be in about three months." The administration is claiming that during the first seven weeks of 1986, the *contras* destroyed 20 trucks, attacked 12 Sandinista barracks, blew up 12 power lines and three bridges, and temporarily closed two major roads. Neither the United States nor Bermudez would reveal casualty estimates. The Sandinistas say that 86 of their soldiers were killed in January and 71 in February, while they killed a total of 756 *contras*. They claim that 22 civilians have been killed this year.

Nicaraguan battle statistics may prove no more accurate than Vietnam body counts, but there are some independent suggestions that the *contras* are not simply a rag-tag force, as critics of administration policy claim. James LeMoyné of the *New York Times* and Peter Collins of ABC News spent two days with the *contras* inside Nicaragua late last month—the first time in two years that American reporters have been allowed to do so—and reported that morale and training seemed to be solid. Former Virginia

governor Chuck Robb, who served as a Marine in Vietnam, just returned from a trip to Central America, including *contra* base camps, and is expected to report favorably on *contra* military prospects.

And the military effort got another boost in the form of a revised appraisal from retired Gen. Paul F. Gorman, former head of the U.S. Army Southern Command, whose critique of the *contras* in January was widely quoted by foes of administration policy. Gorman told the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 28, "I don't think [the Sandinistas] regard the *contras* as a serious threat. I think they've got the situation under control." He said he thought that because of inadequate CIA training, the *contras* were merely a "cross-border raiding force" that was unprepared to run a "sound unconventional warfare campaign" that could win support from the Nicaraguan population.

On February 24, however, Gorman issued a statement saying that he'd just visited Central America and concluded that "the Nicaraguan rebels of the FDN have a fighting chance to present to the Nicaraguan people an alternative to the oppressions and militarism of the government in Managua." He said he was impressed with the pace and extent of FDN infiltration and found its overall campaign plan sound. He said it would take "years" for *contras* to force the Sandinistas to hold free elections, and would not predict a final outcome. Success would depend, he said, on whether the *contras* can avoid large-scale engagements with the Sandinista army, and concentrate instead on reducing the government's control over the population and emphasizing political action to win popular support.

The administration asserts that it is dedicated to the idea of combining military and political action, but it has found it just as hard to get *contra* politics right as to win military funding from Congress. In February, with the resignation of FDN leader Adolfo Calero from the umbrella United Nicaraguan Opposition and the agreement of banker/diplomat Arturo Cruz to stay with UNO, the State Department was claiming victory in its effort to reform the *contras* and put "politicians" in charge of "the military." But then Cruz abruptly quit, announcing his resignation in a letter to the *Miami Herald* on the eve of a House vote on releasing the last \$40 million installment on *contra* funding for this year, and just before the meeting with Bermudez in Miami to talk about reforms.

**C**RUZ AND his supporters claim that in spite of U.S. assurances, Cruz could not be sure that *contra* military leaders would respect civilian authority. They say that to undermine him, either the CIA or the FDN leaked to the press the fact that Cruz had received \$7,000 a month from deposed White House operative Oliver North and that even State Department officials and Cruz's fellow UNO politicians told him to go slow in pressing for reforms. Cruz said in an interview that he had doubts about his role as early as 1985, when he was persuaded to become a *contra* leader. "I am not a politician," he said. "I have been trying

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to liberate myself." He said he intended to quit in early February, but was prevailed upon to stay for two months by his colleagues and by Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. When he saw that "dramatic action" to reform the movement would not be forthcoming, he decided to go for good.

He said he wanted a special commission to recommend procedures for setting up an expanded UNO Assembly to represent all factions of the resistance, and for Luis Rivas, a former anti-Somoza and anti-Sandinista *comandante* under Eden Pastora, to become chief of staff of the *contra* military. U.S. officials, furious with Cruz for quitting on the eve of the House vote, charge that he was unwilling to stay and work for the reforms or allow democratic processes to operate within the resistance. "He wanted things done his way, right away," one official said. "I had no idea he was this unreliable, this irresponsible."

Having built up Cruz as a democratic giant who could transform the *contras* into an army of freedom fighters and win backing for them in Congress and from the rest of the United States (not to mention Central America, Europe and his own Nicaraguan people), the administration was reduced to trashing him as "a flake." Opponents of administration policy, meanwhile, were heading in the reverse direction, building him up as the incorruptible man who wouldn't dissemble when he couldn't prevail. In fact, Cruz is just what he claims to be: a man with little stomach or talent for war or politics. As he made clear after his resignation, he still supports U.S. aid to the *contras*, opposes the Sandinistas, and will stay around to write and talk about *contra* reforms.

**M**EANWHILE, it's unclear where the reform process stands. Asked about submitting to the authority of Luis Rivas as chief of staff, Bermudez was unresponsive, asserting only that he was willing to meld the FDN into a unified national resistance under a joint staff. In meetings in Miami with UNO leaders Alfonso Robello and Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, he said, there was agreement on a plan to expand UNO to include Miskito Indian leaders, representatives of Nicaragua's various political factions, business and labor, and the Southern rebel movement, BOS. Alfredo Cesar, a BOS leader, is increasingly regarded as a major figure in *contra* politics.

Trying to look philosophically at the *contra* political mess, Abrams observed that the resistance consists of three basic groups of people dissatisfied with the Sandinistas—peasants (half the fighting force) who resent Sandinista land seizures and suppression of the Church, Atlantic Coast Indians who wanted to be left alone and weren't, and the urban middle class and elites who lost property and freedom. "UNO reform means trying to get those three to work together better. They never worked together before, which is why they had first Somoza and then the Sandinistas." He said that Calero was the only middle-class politician who bothered to spend time in camp with *contra* peasants, which accounts partly for Cruz's inability to take hold as leader of the movement. This is Abrams's way of

saying he made a mistake in picking Cruz to replace Calero.

Difficult as things may be inside Nicaragua and within the *contra* movement, the cause is most vulnerable to the whims of Washington—the Democrats' propensity to cut off military aid and the administration's inability to manage and sell the policy. A CIA fiasco in mining Nicaraguan harbors led to a 1985 fund cutoff, which led the National Security Council staff to try to continue the flow by irregular and possibly illegal means, the exposure of which again threatens the funding. Congressional (that is, Democratic) probers of *contra* funding have targeted Abrams, a driving force behind administration policy, for allegedly knowing and lying about NSC aide Oliver North's activities. Some Republicans in Congress fear that North's boss, former

national security adviser John Poindexter, may claim under immunity that he told President Reagan about *contra* funding. If that's documented (and it would have to be, given Poindexter's weak record for veracity), it might sink more than just Reagan's Nicaragua policy. It might sink his presidency.

Even if new Iranamok disclosures don't force an end to *contra* funding, its prospects are definitely dicey after the House's March 11 vote to suspend \$40 million in *contra* aid until past expenditures are accounted for. The vote was 230-196, a switch of more than 20 votes since the House approved *contra* funding by 221-209 nine months ago. The administration and the *contras* will get their \$40 million because any resolution to disapprove the money could be vetoed and the veto sustained. However, the House vote and the knife's-edge vote count in the Senate on the \$40 million are bad signs for the administration's request of \$105 million for next year, which will have to win a majority in both houses sometime before October.

**B**OTH SIDES in this struggle think they're going to win. House Majority Whip David Bonior says that "in the wings, two dozen people are waiting to get off this policy." Democratic leaders think it's significant that moderate former *contra*-aid supporters David McCurdy of Oklahoma and Les Aspin of Wisconsin voted against the \$40 million—Aspin, apparently, as the price for being allowed to keep his Armed Services Committee chairmanship—and that *contra* support is now a partisan litmus issue. They also took encouragement from a statement by Republican leader Bob Michel that as matters stood, the Democrats had the votes to win and that the administration should embark on a new tack, emphasizing diplomatic efforts to end the Nicaraguan conflict.

After conservatives howled at Michel, his aides emphasized that he has always favored a three-track approach—supporting the *contras*, trying to talk to the Sandinistas, and giving aid to Central American democracies. His statement, though, seemed to be calculated as a warning that the administration would lose if it did not get cracking on the second two tracks. The Democrats are coming forward with a "positive" proposal to cut off military aid to the *contras*, provide "humanitarian aid" for their resettlement, back Costa Rican president Oscar

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Arias's plan for a cease-fire and elections in Nicaragua, and provide aid to the Central American democracies to help them resist Communist insurgencies and prevent the Sandinista revolution from spreading. House Majority Leader Tom Foley has said that since new military aid is not likely, the "responsible" administration policy would be to set up a "transition policy" for withdrawing the *contras*.

The administration is not buying that, and thinks it can win the votes necessary to reverse the 34-vote anti-*contra* margin in the House by following up on the Arias plan and ultimately forcing Democrats to cast a no-compromise "precipice vote." U.S. negotiator Philip Habib, working with allied Central American presidents, is supposed to try to persuade Arias to modify his proposal to provide for both a negotiated cease-fire between the *contras* and Sandinistas and a change in sequence so that it would not be more than a year (as Arias has proposed) between a cutoff of *contra* funding and free elections in Nicaragua. Foley said that the administration might well pick up votes if it made a good faith effort to negotiate, but Democratic members say they don't trust the administration not to torpedo talks and go for a military victory, as it has in the past.

Whatever its true intentions about negotiations, the administration does plan to play hardball with the Democrats. "Fifteen thousand kids will be fighting when the vote comes this fall," Abrams said. "I don't think the Congress will want to abandon them on the battlefield. The Democrats' strategy is to try and get us to adopt some 'transition' policy so we will do the abandoning for them. We are not going to do that. The president could not be more committed to this. We are not going to abandon the *contras*. Those who want to do so will have to say it and do it in the light of day." Administration officials say that the president, Secretary of State George Shultz, and national security adviser Frank Carlucci are all on board for the "precipice" strategy of doing nothing to help Democrats avoid full responsibility for their actions. White House chief of staff Howard Baker reportedly has not yet weighed in on the issue.

To make the precipice all the more fearsome for Democrats, the administration will try to make the case—as administration witnesses did before the Senate Intelligence Committee on March 17—that the future of all Central America probably rests on *contra* funding. The same argument was made by General Gorman in his February 24 statement. "Should Congress abrogate its commitment to the Nicaraguan rebels," he wrote, "governments of the four democracies in Central America are likely to be shaken. This is no 'domino theory,' but a realistic assessment of the fragility of those governments."

According to Gorman and officials of the administration, Communist insurgents in El Salvador would get both a morale boost and new Sandinista arms assistance if the *contras* were cut off, and frightened rightists in the military might well stage a coup against President Duarte, which could undermine U.S. support and lead to a Communist victory. Variations on the theme might occur in Honduras and Guatemala.

TO THE Democratic proposal that the United States provide aid to bolster the democracies and contain the Sandinistas after a *contra* cutoff, Gorman said that the financial costs probably would be more than Congress would be willing to sustain, and "more importantly, a strategy of containment may be self-defeating by destroying our political basis for commitment" because "some of the governments which could materialize in Central America in the wake of a U.S. turnabout may be authoritarian regimes hardly worthy of U.S. support and vulnerable themselves to Marxism."

Gorman said, "It's my considered judgment that additional aid for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance is a small price to pay for preserving the gains realized in recent years by those we support in Central America, and for keeping open the prospect of a negotiated settlement." Denying aid "would jeopardize all that has been achieved there for democracy in recent years."

He went on to say that the larger issue was U.S. national strategy, not just 1987 aid levels. "I advocate that our strategic objective be pluralistic democracy for all Central Americans," and he recommended that the United States devote its "full power—our political influence, economic vigor, military strength, and moral authority—not for a few months, or for this session of Congress, but the foreseeable future. I urge that Congress adopt a comprehensive, long-range plan for aid for Central America which would convince friends and enemies alike that we are committed, that we intend to stay." Amen.

MORTON KONDRACK